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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The All-Star Game
JULY 9, 2006

Baseball's All-Star Game is coming up Tuesday in Pittsburgh and is the first All-Star Game held in the new ballpark in this once proud baseball city. It is, however, the fifth time Pittsburgh will host this showcase of baseball talent. There are hopes that the return of the game to Pittsburgh will help to renew interest in the game in the former Steel City.

Although the concept of an all-star game dates back to 1858 and a game between all-star teams from Brooklyn and New York, it was seventy years ago that the first modern all-star game was held, July 6, 1933. In the seven decades since, this game has become a marvelous showcase for the best baseball talent, the marking point for mid-season, and a great promotional event for baseball.

The game itself was the creation of Arch Ward, sports editor of the Chicago Tribune, who was able to persuade the owners to hold a game between the American and National League All-Stars in Chicago in conjunction with the Century of Progress Exhibition of 1933. Those who welcomed this game saw it as the dawning of a new age in which the use of modern promotional techniques had arrived in baseball.

A number of owners objected to it as a distraction from the regular season, an unnecessary interruption of the normal patterns. No doubt some also objected because they were not going to make enough money from the game, which was being played for charity. Managers objected to the game because it broke up the regular season, although more objections came from those managers whose teams were doing well than those whose teams were struggling.

After the first All-Star Game, the managers were designated as the pennant winners from the previous year, but at that first game two of the grand old managers, Connie Mack and John McGraw, were given the honor. For the first two years both managers and fans chose the players, and then from 1935-46 the managers selected their teams. Beginning in 1947, the selection of the starting lineup passed to the fans, until 1957 when Cincinnati fans stuffed the ballot box and chose Reds for seven of the eight starting positions.

This led to the removal of the fans from the process from 1958 to 1969. During that period major league managers, coaches, and players, made the selections. In 1970 the selection of the starting lineups returned to the fans. Ballot box stuffing and sentimentalism rather than performance continue as problems with this system that now includes on-line voting. The voting process now also includes a kind of run off with five players chosen from each league for an on-line vote. It is an odd business but seems to generate some buzz for the game, and in this day and age "buzz" is all that matters.

The first contest was dubbed the "Game of the Century," as 49,200 fans packed Comiskey Park and millions listened on radio. Never had there been so much baseball talent gathered in one place. The game featured such stars as Carl Hubbell, Lefty Grove, Earl Averill, Joe Cronin, Frankie Frisch, and Lefty Gomez.

But the star of the first game was Babe Ruth, at age 38, less than two years from retirement still the dominant force in baseball. Over the years the Babe had developed the uncanny ability to hit home runs for special occasions. Appropriately then, Ruth hit the first home run in All-Star Game history; a two run shot in the third inning giving the American League its third run in a 4-2 victory. In the 8th inning Ruth put frosting on the cake making a remarkable running catch in right field off the bat of Chick Hafey to help preserve the victory.

The following year the game moved to the Polo Grounds in New York, where Giant left-handed screwball artist Carl Hubbell was the starting pitcher. In the first and second innings, Hubbell struck out, in order, Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Jimmy Foxx, Al Simmons, and Joe Cronin. All five of these American League All-Stars were subsequently elected to the Hall of Fame. With moments like these it only took two years before the All-Star Game was cemented into the pattern of the baseball season. And many more great moments have followed.

The 1950 All-Star Game was the one in which Ted Williams put the American League ahead with a single in the fifth inning despite having broken his elbow making a catch against the wall in the first inning. It was also the first time to go extra innings with the National League winning 4-3 on a home run by Red Schoendienst of the Cardinals.

One of the more memorable games came in 1971 in Detroit when future Hall of Fame greats Bench, Aaron, Jackson, Frank

Robinson, Killebrew and Clemente hit home runs. The most memorable of all of them was Reggie Jackson's which hit the light tower on the roof of Tiger Stadium in right-centerfield and was measured at 520 feet. Had it not hit the tower it might still be going.

This year the All-Star Game comes in the middle of an interesting season in which the Detroit Tigers have come to the front carrying the best record in baseball into the break. It is a season in which home runs are up, while it would seem steroid use is down, a confounding development to some. Barry Bonds, the home run machine, who passed Babe Ruth earlier in the year, will not be at the All-Star Game. It is a season in which the Yankees might not reach the playoffs, in which the Red Sox are pounding the ball with great abandon, and in which the American League looks to be superior to the National League once again. This may or may not be reflected in the All-Star Game.

Once again this year, Bud Selig's decision to make the All-Star Game the determining factor in home field advantage for the World Series will be in play. It is an absurdity to have this showcase game determine home field for the Series, rather than won-loss records of the teams, or simply a return to rotating home teams by league. In fact, using the home run derby or flipping a coin would be more sensible than plaguing the World Series with this "disconnect" of a decision. Maybe Bud would like to try penalty kicks to determine home field advantage.

Whatever the remainder of this season brings, the All-Star Game remains the All-Star Game, a great showcase for the stars of the national pastime, a chance for baseball to put its best talent on display in one place, honoring them and honoring baseball.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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